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Analysis: An introduction to ethical concepts

Morality and religion

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Problems—moral, religious and medical

Issues of morality, medicine and religious belief can be interrelated in certain highly specific situations; and they can also impinge upon each other in very general ways. Familiar specific problems include the morality of the control of life and death, contraception, abortion, suicide, euthanasia. On the last two of these, a Christian may ask, 'Do we as creatures of a loving God have any right to shorten the life given us, or to deny that God can provide the resources by which that life can continue to have value, even through great suffering and debility?' Is legalized euthanasia 'a direct contravention of the sixth commandment – Thou shalt not kill'? Is it true, as Roman Catholics have claimed, that 'the purposeful termination of any pregnancy' violates the 'fundamental human right... to life itself'? On a different topic: How is one to respond when a Jehovah's Witness (or a member of certain other sects) wishes to deny a child a blood transfusion on alleged scriptural authority? On many of these specific problems, however, there is no simple opposition between religious and non-religious attitudes and moral judgments. Differing moral views can be found among believers and unbelievers both. Appeal to Christian love is to some moralists the only ultimate appeal; and under certain circumstances it may be thought to justify the ending of a human life and the prevention of new life.

Is a secular ethic possible?

More general but no less important religio-moral issues involve the whole question of whether a secular ethic is possible, or whether only divine authority could adequately ground the moral law. If 'to be morally obliged' *means* 'to be commanded by God', it would follow that only if God exists and makes known his will, can there be any moral obligations at all. Again, is moral *motivation* available without the thought of the moral life as response to the love of God, and without any belief in a God who sustains moral effort and eventually vindicates the right and good? Can moral seriousness and a sense that life has 'meaning' survive the loss of any such hope of a final vindication of good and the loss of any expectation of the individual's life continuing after death?

The philosophical debate

We can sample only the first moves in the philosophical debates that arise from those general questions. It may be argued that judgments of value and of obligation logically cannot be derived from claims about God's existence, nature and commands. For if we have reason to say that God's nature is itself supremely good, and His commands binding, we must be relying upon some independent ability to discriminate good from bad and right from wrong. And if even a religious ethic requires us to have such ability (as it must, unless it reduces the moral life to sheer passive submission to commands of whose moral quality we are altogether ignorant), then that same capacity allows us to form a *non*-religious ethic also. Might we not, however, learn by revelation both that God is supremely good and that he wills us to follow a particular way of life? Very well: but how, first of all, do we decide that certain documents are in fact revelatory and that what is there said to be God's will is in fact so? Such a decision is partly and importantly the result of independent moral judgment once again: 'Would a good God have commanded such and such?' 'Is this an account of a deity who is really worthy of praise and worship?'

Some types of moral education have indeed implied that the worthwhileness and 'point' of moral action are dependent on a final divine vindication, and that persons are supremely valuable only if they can be seen as children of God and possessors of immortality. The reply may come, however, that one who believes neither in God nor in the necessary triumph of good has every reason not to lose his moral seriousness and concern for the welfare of others, on that account. To abandon these could only have the consequence of pointlessly adding to human misery: people are no less sensitive to pain, and no less vulnerable to injustice in a world without God. It may further be argued that a belief in human mortality and the absence of divine aid and protection should add, rather, to man's sense of responsibility for his neighbour's wellbeing, making it all the more important that the years we do have are not gratuitously marred or shortened.

Religious derivation of important moral notions

None of this denies that it has been through the religions that many of the most important moral notions have come to general awareness. It is in the New Testament picture of Jesus, for instance, that we find the most memorable expression of *agape*, active, self-giving love. But a very rough distinction may properly be made between the visions of human excellence imparted by a religious figure, and the (disputable, fallible) claims he may make about God and hereafter. Of course the two are importantly connected; but that is not to say they must stand or fall together.

In terms of historical and contemporary experience, a comparison of religious and secular moralities is endlessly complex. Religious morality has elicited both high saintliness and ugly fanaticism: selfless devotion, but also at times bigotry and the fostering of guilt and anxiety. Secular views of morality likewise have had their heights and depths: they have expressed courage, compassionate solidarity, even serenity, in the face of a universe indifferent to value; but at the other extreme anarchic 'permissiveness', irrationalism and nihilism. Comparison of the 'fruits' of religious and secular moralities is important and relevant; yet it is necessarily inconclusive in its outcome. A believer may see an unbeliever's moral seriousness as a happy, but ultimately ungrounded and precarious survival from religious morality. Only through the prayerful acceptance of God's grace (he will say) can a person find resources to sustain the *agape*-centred moral life. The unbeliever may well allow that the sincere *belief* in such divine sustaining may give moral support, yet that is not enough to make the belief true or available to *him*. He claims, in any case, that the thought of his neighbour's need can itself sufficiently motivate the moral life. This very inconclusiveness of appeal to the empirical facts shows up the importance of the moral-philosophical enquiry. We cannot bypass questions about the logical relationship between moral insight or judgment and obedience to command. We are forced to take seriously the very difficult question of the relation between the being of God and his goodness. Does he instantiate in supreme degree a goodness that could *be* and be *known*, even if there were no God? or must we describe him as 'goodness itself'? ('God is his own goodness'.) Even if this last view seems more adequate, can we really make sense of such a description; and could a being, described in this way, also have the nature of an agent, creating, redeeming, judging? – for Christianity requires that of God as well.

Some relevant reading

Brandt, R (1959). *Ethical Theory*, chapter 4.
Maclagan, W G (1961). *The Theological Frontier of Ethics*.
Peters, R S (1973). *Reason and Compassion*.
Robinson, Richard (1964). *An Atheist's Values*.
Bartley, W W (1971). *Morality and Religion*.